

GEOGRAPHY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

READ ALOUD

"Hail O Nile, who comes to give life to the people of Egypt. Created by the sun-god to give life to all who thirst. Who lets the desert drink with streams descending from heaven. Who makes barley and creates wheat so that temples celebrate. When the Nile overflows, offerings are made to you, cattle are [killed] for you, that your goodness be repaid."

These words are from a 3,000-year-old Egyptian song, "Hymn to the Nile."

THE BIG PICTURE

Around 5000 B.C. people began building farming villages in a river valley in Africa, several hundred miles south of Catal Huyuk. The area around Egypt's Nile River valley probably did not look like a very good place to start farming.

The river wound its way through a vast desert with few signs of life. Yet every year the Nile flooded its banks. The river swamped everything in its path with water and mud for four solid months—from July through October.

This yearly flood made the Nile Valley lush and green. It also allowed people to make use of the land. With the help of water from the Nile River, ancient farmers turned the Nile Valley into a productive agricultural region.

Focus Activity

READ TO LEARN

In what ways did the ancient Egyptians depend upon the Nile River?

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PLACES

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Upper Egypt

National Geographic Society

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THE GIFT OF THE NILE

In many ways, Egyptian civilization owes its life to the Nile River. The Nile provided water and food in the desert. This seemed like a blessing from the gods of the ancient people. For that reason, Egypt has often been called the "Gift of the Nile."

A Mighty River

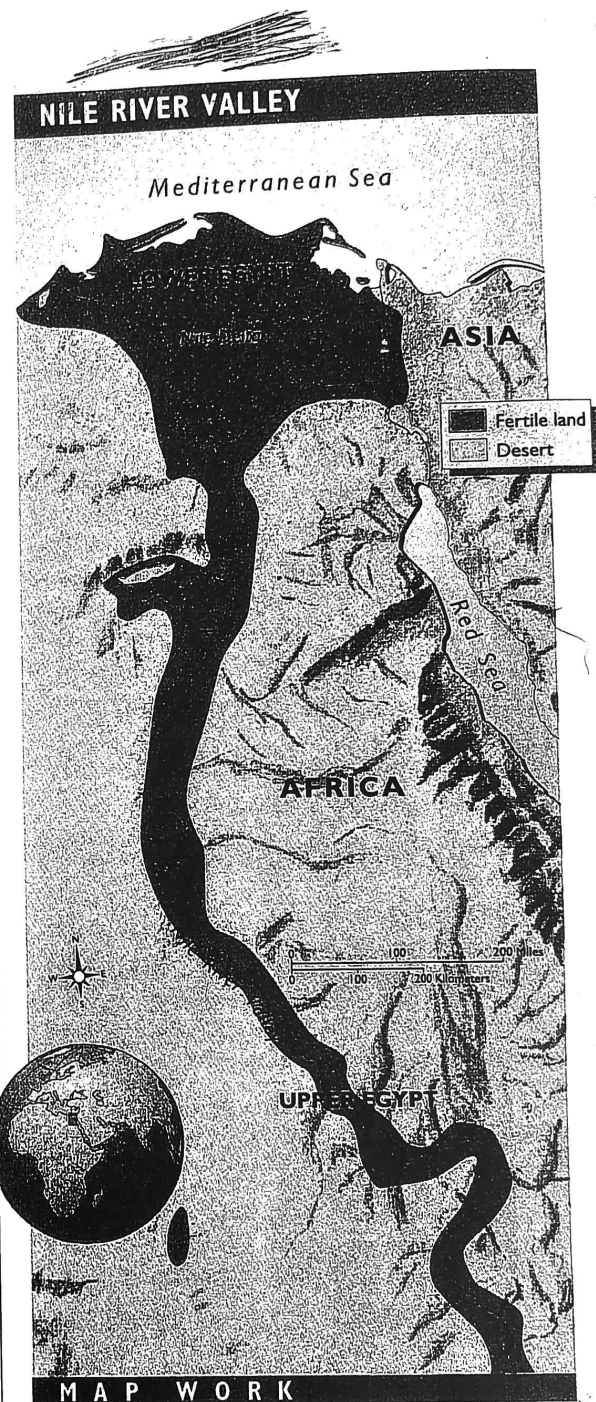
The Nile is the world's longest river. It flows over 4,000 miles north from the snowcapped mountains of East Africa. It passes through the present-day countries of Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt. Then the Nile empties into the warm Mediterranean Sea.

Much of East Africa has a rainy season that lasts from May until September. During that time the Nile swells with rainwater and rushes northward with extra power. The river carries off silt as it goes. Silt is a mixture of tiny bits of soil and rock.

Over time, much of the silt has been deposited where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean. There the river divides into several branches, forming a vast, fan-shaped delta. A delta is very fertile, flat land made of silt left behind as a river drains into a larger body of water. Look at the map on this page. Use the map scale to find the width of the Nile Delta at its widest point.

The Nile Delta region is in northern Egypt, and appears nearer the top on maps that have north at the top. This makes the Delta seem to be "higher." However, the Delta is called Lower Egypt, because it is the lower, or downstream, part of the Nile.

In Upper Egypt, to the south, the Nile cuts through stone cliffs and desert sands. This landscape is very different from the mild, fertile Delta.



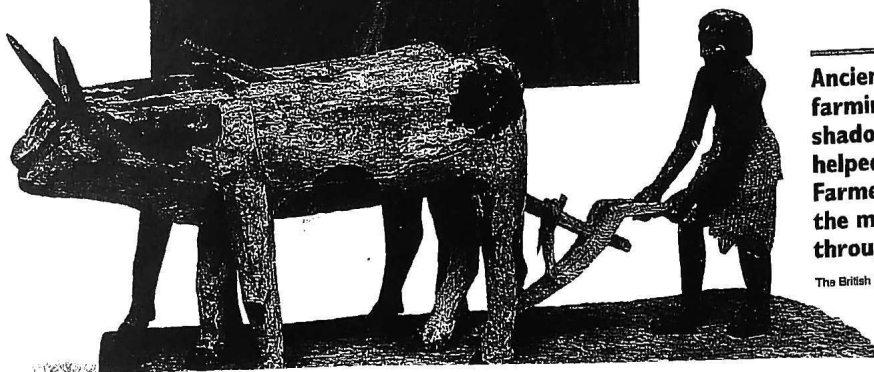
The mighty Nile River winds its way through the northeastern part of Africa.

1. In which direction would you travel to get from the Nile River to the Red Sea?
2. The Nile Delta is near the division between which two continents?
3. Where is the largest fertile region along the Nile?

A LAND OF DROUGHT AND FLOOD

Egyptian farmers almost always welcomed the mud left by each summer's Nile flood. This silt-filled mud was rich in minerals needed by plants. The black soil brought by the Nile contrasted sharply with the dry, yellow sand of Egypt's desert. In many places a farmer could stand with one foot on farmland and the other on sand!

Farmers depended on the right amount of flooding each year to grow successful crops. Too little flooding meant farmers' crops failed and people went hungry. Too much meant people and cattle could be swept away and homes destroyed. Life was a delicate balance in the Nile River valley.



A System of Agriculture

In October the flooded land began to dry. Then farmers planted wheat and barley. They also planted garden vegetables such as cucumbers, lettuce, onions, and beans. Farmers also grew flax, a plant used to make cloth.

To water their newly planted crops, Egypt's farmers used a form of technology called irrigation. Irrigation is the watering of land by means of canals or pipes. At first, farmers simply built dirt walls around their farmland to hold the Nile floodwaters in the fields. Later, they dug small channels, or canals, to bring water from the Nile directly to their farmland. Farmers scooped water from the canals and poured it into the fields, using a bucket-lifter called a shadouf (shah DOOF). The photograph on this page shows how this tool is still used today.

By March the crops were ready for harvesting. In good years the fields were filled with ripe vegetables and grains. Then farm families had more food than they needed. Their surplus, or extra supply of goods, was then gathered up and carried off to storehouses. As in Catal Huyuk, these grain stores made specialization and community life possible.

Travel Along the Nile

Harvest-time ended in late June, before the Nile once again began to flood. During the four-month flood

Ancient Egyptians found ways to make farming easier and more productive. A shadouf, shown in the picture (above), helped distribute water to the fields. Farmers also built plows, like the one in the model (left), which animals pulled through the fields.

The British Museum

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season, farmers could not work in their fields. Instead, many used the time to visit neighboring villages.

Flood season was one of the busiest times for travel on the Nile. Yet river traffic was heavy all year. The Nile was the main way that people and goods moved from place to place. The 600-mile journey between Upper and Lower Egypt would take over a month to walk. In a reed boat it took only about half that time.

WHY IT MATTERS

By 5000 B.C. life in the early farming communities of ancient Egypt centered around the Nile River. The river provided the Egyptian people with fertile soil, water for irrigation, and a means of transportation.

Throughout Egypt's long history, the world's longest river has played a key role. In time, the ancient Egyptians would use the Nile to build the largest civilization the world had ever seen. The following lessons will introduce you to this rich civilization.

Reviewing Facts and Ideas

SUM IT UP

- The Nile is the world's longest river. It is more than 4,000 miles long.
- Farmers' understanding of the yearly Nile floods made community life in Egypt possible.
- Mineral-rich silt deposits and irrigation technology made farming in ancient Egypt very productive.
- People used boats to get from place to place along the Nile.

Links to MATHEMATICS

The Trusty Nilometer!

How did Egyptians measure the yearly level of the Nile flood?

Ancient Egyptians built special staircases along the river to measure the height of the Nile as it rose. Each step was one "cubit" high—the distance from a person's elbow to the tip of the thumb. One cubit is about 20 inches.

In a good flood year, the Nile rose 16 steps on the Nilometers. How many feet does this equal? In a bad flood year, the Nile rose only 7 steps or less. How many feet is this?



THINK ABOUT IT

1. Describe the irrigation methods used by the ancient Egyptians.
2. How did the Nile's yearly floods help ancient Egyptian farmers?
3. **FOCUS** Name three ways the people of ancient Egypt used the Nile River.
4. **THINKING SKILL** As an ancient farmer, decide whether Upper Egypt or Lower Egypt is a better place for farming.
5. **GEOGRAPHY** Look at the map on page 71. Describe three different types of physical regions that the Nile flows through.